

THE GOSPEL AND CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE — JULY 2012

One of the reasons why we believers live beneath our privileges is that we are confused about the relationship between justification and sanctification. We often live as if one is conditioned upon the other. One key theological point to remember is that though justification and sanctification are distinguishable they are absolutely inseparable. Justification is what God does outside the believer. It is Christ for us. It is objective. Sanctification is what God does inside the believer. It is Christ in us. It is subjective and experiential. Sanctification is rooted in justification as cause is to effect. One can never claim to be justified if sanctification is not a present reality. If, however, we separate justification and sanctification we cannot escape the poisons of moralism (Christian behavioralism), legalism (salvation by getting it right), Pharisaism (self justification), subjectivism (experience is my righteousness), mysticism (ladder of ascent) and triumphalism (if I get it reasonably right God will bless me with health, wealth, success and prosperity). All of these “isms” are rooted in a failure to grasp the relationship of justification to sanctification.

Romans 8:1 informs us that for the one who is united to Christ by faith not works, there is now no condemnation. Our acceptance with God is by sheer, unmitigated grace. We are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24). Freely means without a cause. Grace is not conditioned by any quality God may discover in our hearts and lives. If so it would not be grace. Grace is a quality in God's heart. It is His goodness, favor, mercy and love showered upon the undeserving and the ill deserving. It is God being kind to rebels who are at enmity with Him. Grace is free for us but costly for God. God accepts the unacceptable but never in a way that cancels or overrides His justice. The rule of law must be upheld. God must have legal, valid grounds to forgive us and to declare us righteous. He would cease to be God if He ignored His justice. Christ's living and dying for us are the sole grounds of God's ability to judge us and to declare us righteous. The Gospel proclaims that sinners are saved by objective, concrete acts in space-time history. Justification is not found in some process within the person but is found in events and actions outside the person. Just as the snake on the pole was the cure for the poison of the snake bites in the wilderness, so that all that one had to do was look and live, we look at the Son of Man lifted up and we live. No amount of sanctification or inward holiness can bridge the infinite gap and put us in the right. Perfection is not something that God requires at the end of the process. He demands perfection and absolute holiness before a right relationship with Him can even begin.

All rests upon what has been done for us and outside of us in the Person and work of Jesus Christ over 2000 years ago. God broke into history in the Person of His Son, “the Properman” as Luther called Him, the representative Man who bore our nature and so identified with us that all He did was not only for us but legally as if we ourselves had done it. What He did was really and legally our victory. His resurrection was His acceptance with joy in God's presence and His enthronement and exaltation to the right hand was for us. It was His people that God embraced in His Son. The Gospel is not good things God will do but rather good things God has done.

Justification becomes ours by faith alone. Faith is receiving with the empty hand (filled with brokenness) the object our trust, Jesus and what He has done for us. Calvin said we are saved by faith because it is the most self-emptying grace. We receive an alien righteousness, an outside-of-us righteousness in which we are totally passive. We do not produce it, it is never achieved, only received. Therefore, justification is not subjective righteousness any more than condemnation is subjective wickedness. Both are verdicts declaring how one stands in relation to God. Justification is a legal verdict of God declaring

that we are forever right with Him and under His favor. In this matter of our acceptance before God we are not to be anxious about what God thinks of us but we are to rest with assurance in what God thinks of our Substitute. He is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased and so are we by faith in Christ.

The method of our justification is imputation not impartation or the infusing of any righteousness within. To impute is to charge to or credit an account. It is to attribute to the sinner what he does not possess in himself. It is a sweet exchange, His righteousness for our sin. Our status, how we are regarded by God forever changes.

Objections to imputed righteousness are legion, calling it legal fiction, divine make believe, hocus pocus, celestial bookkeeping, or pasted-on righteousness. All of these objections are merely a failure to see the inseparability of justification and sanctification. The point of the Bible is that justification is the only thing that can lead to sanctification because justification is the dynamic cause of sanctification. Justification paves the way for sanctification; it not only deals with the guilt and penalty of sin but also its condemning power. It makes holiness possible by removing sin's lawful right to rule us and establishing our lawful right to walk in holiness.

Let's think about the psychological connection between justification and sanctification. A life of fellowship with God is only possible if we are persuaded that we are already acceptable and pleasing to God. This persuasion is not based upon our past, present or future achievement. It is based upon the truth that God is fully satisfied with Jesus. The assurance of that acceptance enables us to joyfully serve God freely and gladly out of a faith-generated love with no agenda. If I live the Christian life in order to secure acceptance with God, then any free, grateful, spontaneous obedience dries up and withers away. I am driven then by fear of punishment and rejection or pride of achievement and a sense of superiority. The one who is forgiven much loves much and the one who hears 'neither do I condemn you' is the one who wants to go and sin no more.

Even if you are a Christian you can still let your mind drift back to the notion that your acceptability before God depends upon your own sincerity, effort or performance. Perhaps in searching for a greater level of confidence in the fact of God's love for you, you look for some inner reason why God should love you. If only you could point to something within yourself that was clearly deserving of love, then it would be easier to trust that God does in fact love you. This line of thought, while understandable and attractive, ends up making all the difference in the world. Our foundation for security and confidence no longer lies in the Person and work of Christ but rests on something within ourselves that we think will make us loveable and acceptable to God. It is an unconscious step from solid rock to quicksand. We cannot locate this loveable quality within ourselves because there is nothing within us so good that is makes us deserving of God's love. To search for it is futile and fruitless and risks plunging us into introspective self doubt. Any attempt to find a compelling reason why God must love us is an evasion of the most basic truth of the Gospel—that our acceptability to God depends solely on what Jesus Christ has done for us, not on what we have done for ourselves. We can only accept His acceptance as a free gift; we can add nothing to it.

There is a causal connection between justification and sanctification that is established by the New Covenant gift of the Holy Spirit. Christ won the gift of the Holy Spirit for us. Justification by faith alone is the only way to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the primary agent of sanctification.

There is in the life of a Christian a need for a constant returning to justification. Since the life of holiness is fueled and fired by justification, sanctification must be constantly returning to justification; otherwise a new self righteousness is inescapable. We will never reach a point where our fellowship with God does not rest on His blood and righteousness. In one sense Luther is correct when he says, "Sanctification is getting used to your justification". If we do not understand the relationship between justification and sanctification our life will become a distorted caricature of the real thing. As we grasp it more and more we will experience a growing freedom to move out of ourselves and give of ourselves in love to others.